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Chimpanzee Choices

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It is reported that the CEO of a major airline, when asked his opinion of the move toward decentralized management stated: "I'm not going to let the monkeys run the monkey house!". Both he and his airline are no longer in business, but his battlecry for old, paternal thinking still challenges me. Why not let the chimps run the chimp house? Why not at least let them decide what temperature, humidity, light and sound levels they prefer. Why not let them decide if they want to sleep indoors or out, and who they want to be with. Do chimpanzees lie on their backs at night and watch the stars. We know next to nothing about their nocturnal habits, but shouldn't they have the choice of star gazing if they want? My point is, how many of the things we do for apes in zoos, sanctuaries and research facilities could better be done by the chimpanzees, gorillas or orangutans themselves? It's a question of core competence and new thinking.

Are chimpanzees (and other species) competent to participate in their own care? It is estimated humans and chimpanzees split from a common ancestor over ten million years ago. Our common antecedents have thrived since the beginning of life on earth. This means, of course, that for virtually the entire vast space of existence our mutual ancestors thrived without our help. Chimpanzees have survived flood, drought, famine, leopards, parasites and plague, outsmarting even human hunters, at least until very recently. They not only survived, they prospered, and creating varied regional subcultures with unique tool use and perhaps language variations. Throughout these millennia they were competent, overall, to make life and death decisions on a moments notice, as well as daily choices.

It is almost universally assumed that chimpanzees in "managed care" facilities need intensive care. Their fruit must be peeled and diced just so. Regulators ranging from the US Department of Agriculture to the American Association of Laboratory Animal Care prescribe uniform standards for lighting, ventilation and temperature. Just when did chimpanzees lose their competence to make such decisions for themselves? Such questions are never asked. One might as well ask how trees survived for so many millions of years before people came along with pruning, fertilizer and leaf raking to save them. We are simply too close to the trees to see the forest and most of us are too close to the apes to really see them. Perhaps some caregivers are so loving and protective of their "dependents" that they themselves have developed a dependence on being needed as caregivers. More likely, we are so used to our normal roles and routines that we can't picture other worlds, either of the past or of the future. Well, imagine this:

1. Gerty the chimp enters her night shelter and, with the wave of her hairy hand (breaking an infrared light beam) turns on the lights. Other waves turn on a sound system and select her favorite background sounds. She picks up an arm load of her favorite bedding material (she seems to prefer the feel and smell of alfalfa hay, but wood wool and timothy hay are also available) and climbs up to her favorite platform in the penthouse. A few minutes later the lights and sounds turn themselves off until reactivated. Gerty prefers to sleep under the stars beneath the transparent mesh of the penthouse. But if the night becomes too cool she'll pack up her bedding and move back indoors.

2. Kiba is a grandmother many times over. She's frequently stiff and tends to feel cold at night, but likes to stay near her daughter and rambunctious granddaughter. The group can build night nests near each other, her daughter preferring an airy hammock, while Kiba selects a firm perch with a built in warmer activated by her presence. If she becomes too warm, she can roll over and the heat will turn off automatically.

3. Ferdinand, a mid-ranking chimpanzee, is a little hungry and a little picky. He used to get a big breakfast and bigger dinner in his old cage, but now he forages for most of his food. Crickets, raisins and nuts can be teased from artificial termite mounds (he has never seen a real termite) when he wants to help himself. He feeds himself a tidbit at a time all day long, moving from one provisioning station to another, depending on availability and choice to guide his search. Ferdinand doesn't realize, perhaps, that this is the "natural way", that he is demonstrating his natural competence to thousands of zoo visitors. But he probably likes to be able to satisfy both his curiosity and his appetite when he wants, instead of having to wait for dinner, with the frantic positioning for power and authority that meal time used to require. Now he can share or not share his food as he wishes.

4. Nelson has recently become alpha male of the troop. He's a little unsure of his control and likes to keep an eye on things. Fortunately his habitat includes a "throne", high boulders under a sheltering overhang. He not only can see most of the habitat but also much of the surrounding zoo area, including all of the principal public and service approaches. If he needs to "make a statement", either to his troop or to the public, he can come thundering down the hill and bang on a convenient "drum trees". His troop need only look uphill to be reassured by his commanding presence.

5. Soon it will be time for Nelson to lead the other males in patrolling the boundary, which is complex and varied. One separate part of his habitat is shared consecutively with baboons, vervet monkeys and impala. He never knows when the way in will be open to the chimps, or what he'll find when they enter the area: so far they haven't actually met the other animals, but he sees them daily from a distance. This concept of "animal rotation" and "activity based design" is very new to zoos, but seems "natural" enough to Nelson.

These scenarios are fictions, but each of them could be implemented today. The technology is available at your neighborhood Radio Shack. Louisville Zoo rotates orangutans, tapirs, tigers and other species consecutively through interconnected habitats on a frequent random basis and the Toledo Zoo rotates chimps, gorillas and orangutans. These parts of the process are relatively easy. The hard part is to ask chimpanzee and other animal caregivers to fundamentally rethink their rolls, to ask themselves, how many of the things we do for "our" apes could they do for themselves?" What kinds of facilities would we need to accomplish this? What sorts of husbandry policies would empower the chimpanzees to "be all that they can be"? What would we have to give up to enable our closest living primate relatives to return to their proud heritage as "other nations", voluntarily partnering with humans out of mutual interest. How far could we really go in letting the chimps run the chimp house?